

Booked, Packed... and Slightly Nervous: The Accommodation Gamble on a Birding Trip

There's a very specific kind of relief that comes from knowing you're not pitching a tent in the dark.

If you've ever arrived at a campsite after a long day on the road, headlights slicing through dust, everyone a little quieter than usual, you'll know exactly what I mean. The thought of wrestling with poles, pegs and patience while your torch slowly loses its will to live is not exactly the romantic version of a birding holiday.

We are campers. Proper campers. Okay fine, let's be honest, we're probably closer to glampers. We love the rhythm of it, the early mornings, the smell of coffee poured from a slightly dented flask, the sounds of the bush waking up around us. But every now and then, especially on those longer December trips where you're covering serious distance, the idea of a real bed and a hot shower waiting for you at the end of the day feels less like a luxury and more like a very good decision.

That's where Airbnb comes in.

Over the past couple of Cape trips, places like Sedgefield, Storms River, and Hout Bay have all been part of our route, and somewhere along the line I got promoted, or maybe thrown, into the role of "Accommodation Booker". Which sounds great in theory... until you realise you're responsible for where everyone sleeps.

No pressure.

Because here's the thing about booking an Airbnb from a few hundred, sometimes over a thousand, kilometres away, you are working entirely off trust. Photos, reviews, a few carefully chosen words in a description. It can look like a dream. Ocean views, clean finishes, cosy interiors, "perfect for birders" if you're lucky. You scroll, compare, second guess, open ten tabs, close nine, and then finally hit "book" with a little internal "please be good".

And then you wait.

Most of the time, it works out beautifully. We've had some absolute gems. Places where you walk in and it somehow feels even better than the photos. Waking up to birdsong filtering through an open window, making coffee in a quiet kitchen while the rest of the house is still asleep, stepping outside and realising your morning birding has already started before you've even left the property. Those are the wins. The ones that make you feel like you've cracked the system.

But there's always that small voice in the back of your mind.

What if it doesn't?

Because it can go wrong. And when it does, it really goes wrong.

A few years ago, Luca and his family had one of those stories that still gets told with a mix of disbelief and laughter. They arrived at their booked accommodation, after a long trip, expecting what they'd seen online... and it wasn't just slightly different. It was completely

different. Turns out the owner had two properties. The one advertised, polished, finished, picture-perfect. And the one they were standing in... very much not that. Mid-renovation, incomplete, not even close to what had been promised.

And somehow, that's the one they'd been given.

No warning. No heads-up. Just a "this will do" situation after hours on the road.

Except it didn't "do".

The place wasn't even livable. Not uncomfortable, not disappointing, properly unlivable. And suddenly, after what was already a long day of travel, they had no choice but to leave. Bags back in the car, frustration creeping in, and the clock already well past when you want to be figuring things out.

They ended up driving around after dark trying to find somewhere else to stay, and believe me, in December, just a few days after Christmas, that is no easy feat. Everything is full, everything is busy, and options become very limited very quickly.

Now imagine that moment. You're tired, it's late, and your "comfortable stay" has turned into a scramble you never planned for. It's not just inconvenient, it shifts the entire tone of the trip in an instant.

That's the risk.

So how do you actually protect yourself when you're booking from so far away?

Over time, I've learned a few things, mostly from a place of being slightly paranoid, but in a good way. Reviews matter more than photos. If something has a long list of recent, detailed, consistent reviews, that's usually a good sign. Not just "great stay" but proper comments about cleanliness, accuracy, communication. You start to pick up patterns.

Messaging the host beforehand helps too. Even just a simple question can give you a feel for how responsive and genuine they are. If someone takes days to reply or gives vague answers, that's usually not a great sign.

And then there's the instinct part. If something looks too good for the price, there's often a reason. Not always, but often enough to pause and double check.

The other big thing is knowing what to do if it does go wrong. Airbnb, as a platform, does offer support if a place is not as advertised. But timing matters. You need to raise it immediately, document everything, photos, messages, all of it. It's not the kind of thing you leave until the next day and hope it sorts itself out.

Because at the end of the day, accommodation isn't just a place to sleep on a birding trip. It's part of the experience. It's where you start your morning, where you come back to after a long day in the field, where stories get told over dinner, where you plan the next day's route.

When it works, it really adds to the trip. It gives you comfort without losing that sense of adventure. It makes those longer travel days feel manageable. It gives you that small moment of relief when you pull in, switch off the engine, and realise you can just walk inside.

No tent. No pegs. No torch balancing act.

Just a key, a door, and hopefully... exactly what you booked.